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ABSTRACT

The benefits of multiculturalism on the college campus and roles the college union can play are discussed. It is suggested that multiculturalism requires college union professionals to go one step beyond cultural pluralism by integrating the beneficial contributions of diversity. The following views are offered: (1) In addition to considering the needs, values, and culture of all its students in assessment and planning, the college union staff and the college's leaders need to respect those needs and values; (2) college programs should reflect the diverse interests of the entire campus population, lounges should be provided for interaction, and food services should offer a varied menu; and (3) before providing student activities that focus on social responsibility, staff and decision-making boards should be exposed to training/discussion that encourages them to appreciate, challenge, and integrate differences of opinion, values, and ideas. It is concluded that the college's environment and quality of the interpersonal development of students are enhanced when the college union adopts multiculturalism in its delivery of programs and services and in its staffing and decision-making boards. (SW)

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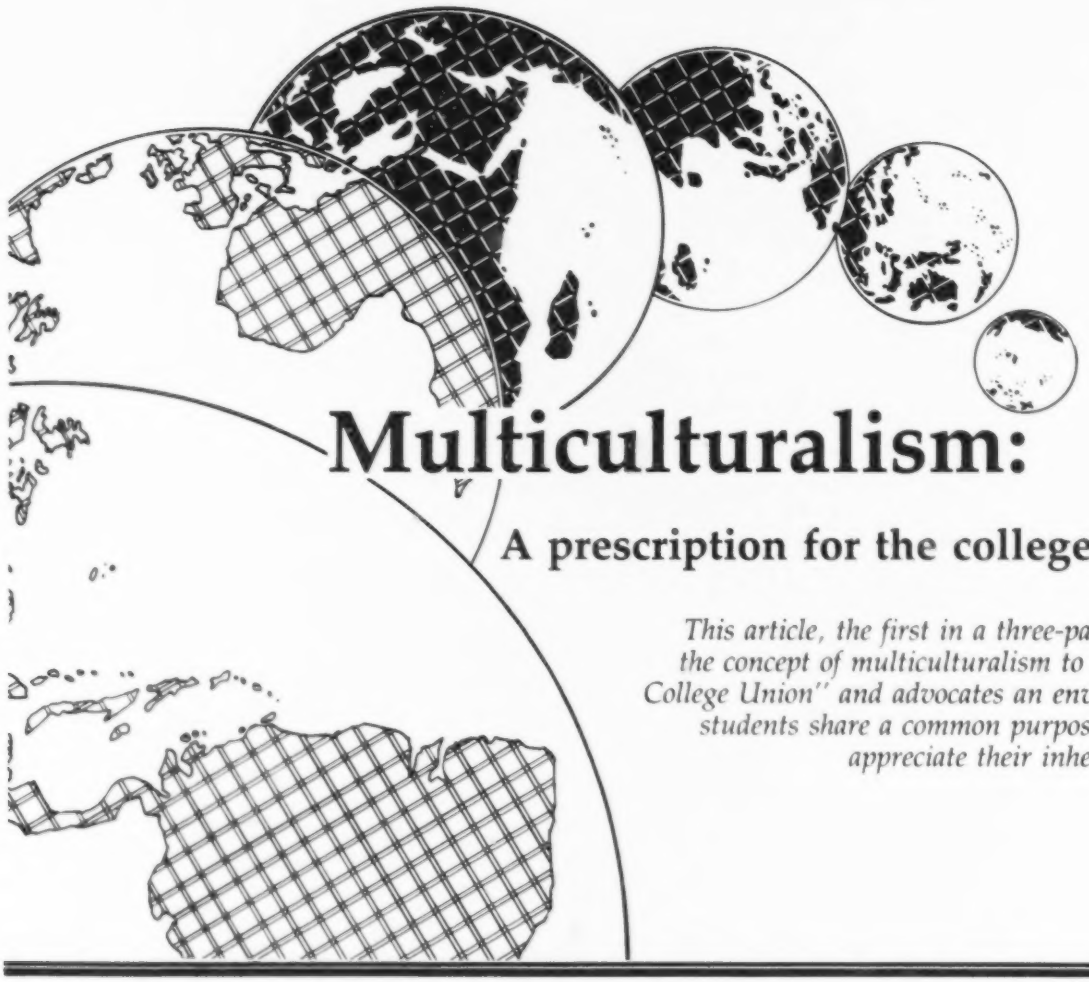

Multiculturalism:

A prescription for the college union

This article, the first in a three-part series, relates the concept of multiculturalism to the "Role of the College Union" and advocates an environment where students share a common purpose yet accept and appreciate their inherent differences.

Greig M. Stewart and John A. Hartt

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With the 1986–87 academic year, the "Role of the College Union" statement enters its fourth decade of interpretation and application. This year also witnesses the Association of College Unions-International addressing the issue of multiculturalism at its annual conference. In Boston, ACU-I delegates will examine whether the union profession should embrace or erase multiculturalism.

The answer is implicit within the college union role statement. Unions must embrace multiculturalism to respond effectively to the needs of a new generation of college students.

The challenge

No event or transition has posed a greater challenge to the cohesion and health of the college union than the changing racial and ethnic composition of today's campuses (Pruitt, 1978; Thomas, 1981). Once the bastion of white, middle-class Americans of European descent, our student bodies are increasingly composed of minorities and internationals.

These non-majority students often bring with them world views quite different from traditional students. For the college union on a predominantly white campus, the potential for conflict is evident.

Can an environment be created where students share a sense of purpose and unity, yet at the same time accept and appreciate their differences? For most of us, an answer to that question requires reassessment of the basic assumptions, principles, and values upon which the college union has been built.

Benefits of multiculturalism

Multiculturalism has been defined as "that state in which one has mastered the knowledge and developed the skills necessary to feel comfortable and communicate effectively with people of any culture encountered and in any situation involving a group of people of diverse cultural backgrounds" (Pusch, 1979).

Adler (1974) expands on this concept by seeing multiculturalism more as a process through which we can perceive our world beyond our indigenous boundaries to achieve a vision of a global community. His concept of "living on the boundary" exemplifies the fact that a multicultural person is "neither totally *a part of* nor *a part from* his or her culture" and is constantly open to the "tension of the moment," resulting from interacting and confronting new ideas and different peoples (p. 25). It is this frame of reference that is meant by multiculturalism.

Incorporating multiculturalism into campus life can result in a variety of benefits. For the non-majority student, multiculturalism can counteract the disenfranchisement felt by many members of special populations. Multiculturalism can also improve the delivery of services by helping college union professionals see beyond their own cultural barriers to empathize with the feelings and needs of non-majority students.

For the majority student, college union professionals should recognize the contribution a multicultural filter can make primarily as a developmental tool. Many majority students come to campus with values that reflect a monocultural or bicultural experience. Such a values set can inhibit a student's development by forestalling the "decentering" process, a primary component of development (Muuss, 1975). A multicultural experience can assist students' development by providing opportunities to engage in and incorporate components of the diversity present within the campus environment. Additionally, majority students learn skills that enhance their ability to interact in an increasingly diverse world, a trait that can impress future employers.

Already, the profession has reaped benefits from the use of multiculturalism, particularly in the field of management. One example is the wide acceptance of components of Theory Z (Ouchi, 1981). Higher education increasingly emphasizes consensus building, cooperative decision making, and group projects. Such contributions gleaned from cultures other than our own can only enhance the openness to change and growth within a dynamic community.

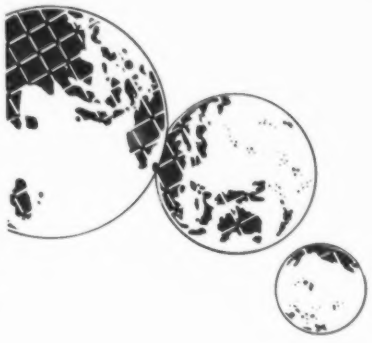
The issue of difference

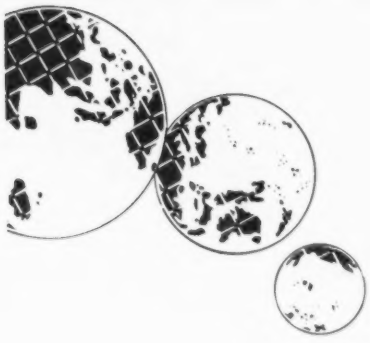
Chavez and Carlson (1985) present a historical perspective of how college unions have responded to the diversity issue on college campuses. Adding to that is the role student affairs professionals have grown to assume. Historically, we have been problem solvers. The problem-solving process has often been haphazard because of the critical nature of situations.

The post-war campus of the '50s reflected a fairly monocultural set of values. During the student unrest of the '60s, many campuses added programs, policies, and services in a patchwork fashion to the existing student affairs agenda. The monocultural filter was replaced by a bicultural values set. The '70s witnessed an "anything goes—what's best for me" approach that resulted in replacing a bicultural values set with no specific set of values. In doing so, student affairs professionals denied their responsibility for contributing to the interpersonal development of students.

With what options are we left? None of our societal institutions is free of culture (Adler, 1974). Consequently the educational environment is obligated to embrace a clear and sound set of values.

The adoption of a unidimensional values set, however, should raise caution because it inhibits the interpersonal development of students. A bicultural values set merely legitimizes tolerance for those values in conflict to the majority population. Concerted efforts to interweave the benefits of diversity into the total environment is overlooked. Embracing all values through the adoption of cultural pluralism may result in conflict, polarization, or the inhibition of qualitative change. It is this qualita-





tive change that multiculturalism underscores.

When addressing the issue, many campuses fear that multiculturalism will result in a diffusion of values concluding in no clear mission, direction, or purpose. This is a legitimate fear. However, multiculturalism requires college union professionals to go one step beyond cultural pluralism by engaging in a process of integrating beneficial contributions of the diversity around us. To balance a core set of values with the challenges of a dynamic environment is no easy task. The community must be strong enough to allow for learning from the diversity within. Multiculturalism reinforces the environment and allows such learning to occur.

Among all student services staff, college union professionals possess a most humbling mission as they are in charge of unique campus environments. Unions can bring the entire campus community together. If approached as a vibrant place where all congregate within a defined yet flexible set of values that is constantly growing, evolving, and being challenged, then the college union will begin to serve the needs of its community as its community constantly changes.

The union's multicultural role

The "Role of the College Union" has four basic tenets.

> *1. The union is the community center of the college, for all the members of the college family—students, faculty, administration, alumni, and guests. It is not just a building; it is also an organization and a program. Together they represent a well-considered plan for the community life of the college.*

Historically, American higher education has had a mission of addressing the needs of its citizens. As our citizenry changes, so does the campus community. Consequently, we need to reassess and redefine our communities, particularly the growing diversity of campus populations.

The second component of this tenet is the "well-considered plan for the community life of the college." Given the changing composition of our college campus, unions must question whether they do all they can to interweave and blend the needs and potential contributions of all students into that plan.

Both in services and programs, we must reassess our plans rather than engage in patchwork management. Patchwork management ignores the responsibility to question the values on which the college union is built. It also overlooks the extent to which we should continue to operate under given assumptions or to what extent we are willing to adapt.

Such an approach does not deny the institution's right or the responsibility to identify what it considers essential to the growth and development of its members. Nor does it deny the need for establishing a set of values to which it must adhere. What it questions is whether those agreed upon values are appropriate for today's campus community and whether it truly supports the college union point of view. For example, must evening programs end promptly at 1 a.m.? Should more effort be given to personalized, one-to-one invitations in addition to fliers and advertisements?

In assessment and planning, the college union must not only consider the needs, values, and culture of all its population, it must also examine its willingness to adapt within outlined professional boundaries to respect those needs and values. Such respect can preserve that which is most valued to enrich the whole.

> *2. As the "living room" or the "hearthstone" of the college, the union provides for the services, conveniences, and amenities the members of the college family need in their daily life on the campus and for getting to know and understand one another through informal association outside the classroom.*

As the campus living room, the college union must facilitate the coming together of community members outside the classroom. There is evidence that many students feel culturally isolated either by choice (Klein, Miller, & Alexander, 1974) or by the way the campus environment is structured (Banning, 1974). The union should diligently assess the services, conveniences, and amenity needs of its population and identify a representative cross-population to articulate those needs for its plan and potential redesign. For example, un-

ions should focus on providing informal lounges and convening areas that facilitate the interaction of a variety of groups. Food services should offer a varied menu. Programs should reflect the diverse interests of the entire campus population.

3. The union is part of the educational program of the college.

As the center of college community life, it serves as a laboratory of citizenship, training students in social responsibility and for leadership in our democracy.

Of all the tenets of the "Role of the College Union," this is the most value laden. Because of its unique environment, the college union can truly serve as a laboratory of citizenship through the teaching of social responsibility.

"Historically, American higher education has had a mission of addressing the needs of its citizens. As our citizenry changes, so does the campus community."

The multicultural limitations of this tenet lie in the focus on the development of leadership for "our democracy." Though many of the college union decision-making processes reflect democratic values, our goal in the '80s must reach beyond our democracy and embrace the concept of developing citizens for an interdependent world (Newman, 1985). The campus can serve as a microcosmic laboratory of our world where democratic processes can underscore the necessity for representation and consideration of all within the community.

Through its various boards, committees, and staff, it provides a cultural, social, and recreational program, aiming to make free time activity a cooperative factor with study in education.

In all its processes it encourages self-directed activity, giving maximum opportunity for self-realization and for growth in individual social competency and group effectiveness. Its goal is the development of persons as well as intellects.

Higher education is an environment of self-directed activity. Consequently, the efforts within the union parallel that of the institution. Multiculturalism can help promote a student's development in individual social competency and group effectiveness, resulting in the development of the total student. Many majority students have had little experience within a diverse environment. Few have had a chance to question basic assumptions about everyday issues such as time or communication patterns. Cultures interpret these values quite differently. As student development specialists, we can contribute to the development of the total student by structuring opportunities for our staff and decision-making boards to share, appreciate, challenge, and integrate differences of opinion, values, and ideas.

4. The union serves as a unifying force in the life of the college, cultivating enduring regard for and loyalty to the college.

As a unique environment within the college, unions have the opportunity to promote an ethos about one's total campus experience. It can serve as a unifying force, not by promoting a melting pot approach, but through structuring an environment where diversity is encouraged and respected. To achieve this, the institution must provide a certain degree of leadership and guidance. That leadership must listen, respect, and tolerate diversity. By not doing so, the institution appears rigid and value laden and may alienate or polarize the members within. Such consequences jeopardize the regard for and loyalty to the college experience. Loyalty to the college will come from the articulation of a clear set of values to which students can contribute and through which they can learn.

Conclusion

Inherent in the "Role of the College Union" is the embrace of multiculturalism. Not only must college unions be environments that address the service and programmatic needs of all community members, it must also present a significant values structure that welcomes constructive evolution. Only then are all students provided the opportunity to question their own values systems and learn from that process. This is not done through a monocultural or bicultural filter. Nor can it risk the diffusion of a pluralistic values approach. By adopting multiculturalism in its delivery of programs and services and in its staffing and decision-making boards, college unions can significantly enhance the environment of the campus and the quality of the interpersonal development of all students.

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